

Labor Force Participation



Utah played catch-up in 1980, when its participation rate of 50 percent equaled the national average. Since that point, Utah has consistently shown **higher** participation rates than the U.S. average. People may think that a smaller share of Utah women work than the national average, but it's just not so. In 2000, Utah's rate measured almost 60 percent compared to a 57-percent rate for the United States.

While Utah women's rate of labor force participation had climbed steadily upward, Utah men have actually decreased their participation. In 1950, almost 83 percent of Utah men were in the labor force compared to 77 percent in 2000. This drop in the male workforce participation has resulted largely from the trend toward early retirement.

By Lecia Langston

Why?

Why do Utah women show higher participation rates than their national counterparts? Several factors may come into play.

- ✦ Utah women are younger in general, and younger women are more likely to work.
- ✦ Utah's large families require more income and therefore more workers.
- ✦ Women with more education are more likely to work and Utah's women are relatively well-educated.

The Male/Female Split

Not surprisingly, women make up a much larger share of the labor market today than they did in 1950. Back in the "Leave it to Beaver" days, only 24 percent of the Utah labor force was female. In 2000, almost 45 percent of Utah workers are women.

They're here. In 2000, 61 percent of Utah's women 16 years and older were working or actively seeking employment. Even though record numbers of women are now employed, they have played an important part in America's paid labor force since before the turn of the century.

In 1890, 18 percent of U.S. working-age women were part of the labor force. From that point, female participation rates have grown at a steady speed—except for the swell experienced in World War II as women filled the employment gaps left by soldiers.

The influx of women into the labor market has occurred gradually. Since the post WWII years, women's participation rates have increased about 8 percentage points every decade. (A participation rate is the share of the working-age population working or looking for work.)

A Utah Participation History

The Census for 1950 indicated that 25 percent of Utah's working-age women had joined the labor force. This rate fell significantly below the national average of 30 percent for the year. Now, the Census tells us that more than 60 percent of Utah women work outside the home—more than double the 1950 rate.

The Age Factor

When are Utah women most likely to work? Women aged 20-24 show the highest labor force participation—76 percent work for pay. However, next in line come women between the ages of 45-54—three-fourths of these women work.

Women at the fringes of the age distribution are least likely to have paid employment. Young women aged 16-19 years show a 61 percent participation rate, while only 40 percent of older women (ages 60-64) work for pay. Interestingly, 9 percent of women 65 years and older are still making money in the labor market.

The Country Mouse and the City Mouse

In general, more densely populated areas have higher participation rates. Utah's most metropolitan counties all rank near the top of the participation ranking. This may have to do with the availability of positions. However, Summit and Grand counties (with economies heavily reliant on tourism), show the highest participation rates—69 and 64 percent respectively.

Counties where the population is less dense and older tend to have the lowest participation rates. Piute County is one of the smallest counties in the state and also has the oldest population. It shows the lowest female participation rate in 2000 in Utah—only 43 percent.

Utah's Families at Work

Gone are the days of the traditional working father and stay at home mom. In 2000, most of Utah's married couple families (54 percent) included both a working father and mother. Keep in mind that 14 percent of married-couple families have neither wife nor husband in the workforce. In addition, 5 percent of these families have a wife who works and a husband who does not.

Mom's Working, Too

Most moms work. In Utah, almost 60 percent of mothers with preschool age children work outside the home—that's slightly lower than the U.S. average. However, Utah is neck and neck with the U.S. in the participation rankings for mothers with children 6-17. Three-fourths of both Utah and U.S. mothers of school-age children only work outside the home.

A Dubious Honor

While more and more women are a part of the labor force, they are more likely than men to be unemployed. Historically, female unemployment rates have exceeded male unemployment rates. Since 1988, Utah female unemployment rates have surpassed male jobless rates—except toward the end of the most recent recession. For example, in 1988 the female unemployment rate measured 4.4 percent; the male figure registered only 3.3 percent. The fact that women tend to move in and out of the labor market more than their male counterparts accounts for much of this pattern.

However, in recessions, industries which typically employ higher percentages of men—like manufacturing—are hardest hit. Therefore, male jobless rates may rise above those of women. This occurred in 2003, when the female unemployment rate registered 5.4 compared to the male average of 5.8 percent.

Working Nine to Five

Even though the gap between male and female participation in the labor force may be narrowing, the work patterns of women and men still differ significantly. For one thing, women are much more likely to work part-time than men. In 2002, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 38 percent of Utah's women employees worked part-time—only 15 percent of men registered in that same category. In fact, Utah women account for over two-thirds of those working less than full-time.

Nevertheless, women are working longer hours than ever before. The average Utah woman worked 33 hours per week in 2002—not all that far behind men with an average of 41 hours per week.

Utah women are much more likely to work part-time than their U.S. counterparts. Roughly 38 percent of Utah's female labor force works part-time compared to 25 percent of the U.S. female labor force. Larger families may make working longer hours more difficult in Utah

Of course, Utah's males are also more likely to work part-time (15 percent compared to 11 percent nationally). Why? Utah has a high participation rate among its teen-age population—both male and female. These young people are more likely to engage in part-time work.

Why are More and More Women Working?

- Many work to provide families with a higher standard of living..
- Smaller families and delayed child birth make it easier for women to combine home and work responsibilities.
- Women are obtaining more education—providing access to more interesting and better paying jobs.
- Women find paid employment offers them opportunities to use and develop skills and talents not necessarily needed in the home.
- Changes in social mores or norms make employment more acceptable for women.
- Economic expansion has provided more jobs.

The times they are a-changing. Labor force participation for Utah women has now become the norm rather than the exception.